Rural Alberta:
Land of Opportunity

MLA Steering Committee
Report on Rural Development

March 2004

Message from the MLA Steering Committee

In July 2002, the Honourable Shirley McClellan, Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, asked us to examine why the Alberta Advantage, which has stimulated economic growth along the Edmonton-Calgary corridor, has not appeared to create growth in much of rural Alberta. Our mandate was to consult with rural Albertans, identify challenges and make recommendations to expand rural community and economic development.

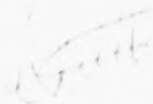
After extensive research, review and talking with hundreds of rural residents, we have gained a greater appreciation of the complexity of issues facing rural communities. Rural areas make a significant contribution to this province's enviable prosperity, yet rural Albertans struggle with the effects of a relative decline in their numbers. Those effects include loss of key essential services, employment opportunities, leadership capacity, young people and, many feel, a political voice.

The complexity of the issues requires a broad, long-term approach. This report contains recommendations that, we believe, can improve the ability of rural Albertans to be partners in Alberta's economic development over the next ten to fifteen years. The recommendations outline how the Government of Alberta can support the efforts of rural communities and rural leaders. Government cannot lead the process. It can ensure the services, tools, skills and infrastructure required for economic and community development are reasonably available to rural communities, and it can actively foster partnerships among communities, government ministries, and public and private organizations.

It is important that action be taken now. The province is at a crossroads. Our natural resource base—oil and gas, mines and minerals, forests and farms, and impressive scenery—is located in rural areas, and continued sustainable development depends on the presence of skilled people, commercial and public services and transportation links. Yet many rural communities are on the verge of disappearing. Their loss would make economic growth more challenging for the entire province.

Many people lent their knowledge and expertise to the consultation process and development of this report. The Rural Development Initiative of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and the facilitators provided by Community Development were especially helpful. We are grateful for their assistance and support.

Doug Griffiths
MLA, Wainwright



Luke Ouellette
MLA, Innisfail-Sylvan Lake

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Executive Summary

Over the last 30 years, Alberta has enjoyed strong economic growth. That growth has changed rural Alberta. In 1950, more than half of Albertans lived in rural areas; fifty years later, only one-quarter did. Economic shifts, from primary production to value-added and knowledge-based industries, have moved opportunities and activity away from smaller communities towards larger centres. Public and private sector services have become more centralized. These changes have left many rural Albertans questioning the future of their communities.

"Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms, and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country." – *William Jennings Bryan, 1896*

The MLA Steering Committee for Rural Development, consisting of Doug Griffiths, MLA for Wainwright and Luke Ouellette, MLA for Innisfail/Sylvan Lake, have consulted with rural Albertans on the challenges they face. Their views and ideas are the basis of recommendations to promote rural development as a key part of Alberta's economic development strategy.

Challenges and Opportunities

Rural Albertans identified challenges and opportunities in eight interrelated areas:

- **Human Resources** – rural communities are losing their youth and their skilled professionals, both sources of potential leadership.
- **Social Infrastructure** – many areas are losing important services, like schools, health care, and recreational and cultural programs, which support economic and community development.
- **Physical Infrastructure** – rural communities regard public buildings as community assets, and want them used effectively. They are concerned about the affordability of essential services, like water treatment, and community facilities. Many feel roads and other transportation services in their communities are not adequate.
- **Business and Economy** – International, national and local crises have had a disproportionate impact on rural communities. Opportunities exist for the diversification of the rural economy, but access to the necessary skills and tools, like technology and financing, is limited.
- **Working Together** – regional collaboration can help meet many of the challenges facing rural communities. Partnerships are regarded as critical to successful rural development, among communities, government ministries and industry.
- **Culture and Quality of Life** – preservation of their heritage and quality of life is needed to enhance the attractiveness of communities as places to live and invest.

- **Environment** – good stewardship of the environment is seen as critical to maintaining industries like agriculture and tourism, and as a source of economic diversification. However, rural Albertans are concerned that they bear the costs of good stewardship while all Albertans enjoy the benefits.

- **Government** – rural Albertans believe that government funding formulas, policies and regulations do not recognize their unique circumstances, and that it is increasingly difficult to get rural concerns on the provincial agenda.

Vision

The MLA Steering Committee worked with stakeholders in rural Alberta to develop a vision for rural development:

> **A rural Alberta that has vibrant and sustainable communities in which rural and urban families, individuals, organizations, businesses and governments are vital contributors to the growth, prosperity and quality of life of Albertans.**

Recommendations: A Framework for Rural Development

The first step in creating sustainable communities is to ensure that their foundation—the four pillars of health care, education, economic growth and community infrastructure—are strong. That foundation must then be linked to other elements of sustainability—quality of life, support for youth, opportunities for Aboriginal Albertans and preservation of the environment. Finally, the communities need to be protected, by ensuring a strong voice for rural Alberta in government decision-making.

The recommendations build on the Government of Alberta's three core businesses of people, preservation and prosperity by: investing in people; preserving the environment, culture, heritage and infrastructure that supports rural development; and increasing economic diversity and employment opportunities.

A. Strengthening the Four Pillars of Rural Communities

1. Health

- Consider the recommendations of the Rural Health Strategy.

2. Learning and Skill Development

- Recognize the unique situation of small rural and remote schools in providing quality of education.
- Provide rural Alberta with reasonable local access to post secondary, technical and professional training and development.
- Build collaborative approaches with learning and skill development providers to better serve rural Alberta.
- Implement the rural focused recommendations contained in the report of the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning.

3. Economic Growth

- Encourage rural partnerships and regional cooperation as a driving force for rural growth and sustainability.
- Increase flexibility in policies and regulations to respond to rural needs and regional uniqueness.
- Increase access to venture capital and loans targeted at rural Alberta.
- Encourage and support value adding of rural resources to maximize rural growth and sustainability.
- Encourage and support small business projects in rural Alberta.
- Increase the recognition of tourism as a high-growth potential sector of the economy, particularly the rural economy.

4. Community Infrastructure

- Adjust funding formulas to reflect the additional costs and real benefits of providing services in rural and remote locations.
- Provide rural communities with the resources and support to build their local capacity for leadership, organizational development, asset assessment and empowerment.
- Maintain and utilize publicly funded infrastructure to maximize community and regional benefit.

B. Critical Links for Sustainability

- Recognize that economic and community development are interdependent activities and must be linked in both development and implementation.
- Promote the arts, culture, sports, recreation and heritage in rural Alberta and recognize their importance in community economic development.
- Provide mechanisms to actively engage youth in rural development.
- Ensure Aboriginal Albertans participate in rural development.
- Support good stewardship of Alberta's natural resources.

C. A Stronger Rural Voice

- Create mechanisms to maintain a rural focus and identify and champion rural issues.
- Hold regularly scheduled dialogue meetings in rural Alberta involving rural Albertans and Government Caucus.

These recommendations need to be acted on quickly. Communities themselves will need to take the initiative, and the Government of Alberta must support their efforts. A network of vital rural communities is crucial to Alberta's continued growth. They should be part of the Alberta Advantage — good places to live, work and play.

Introduction

Alberta is a land of opportunity. Its vast natural resource wealth and the entrepreneurial spirit of its people have fueled economic growth and individual prosperity. Over the last 30 years, Alberta has become a player in a global economy, focused on international trade and competing in the information and technology age.

Much of the province's recent economic growth has occurred in its cities, along the Highway 2 corridor between Edmonton and Calgary and in resource rich communities. That growth is based on oil and gas, energy production, mines and minerals, forests, agricultural production and major tourism attractions located in rural Alberta. It depends on an infrastructure system—roads, services and commercial centres—that extends to the far reaches of the province.

Why focus on rural development?

Recent research shows that the viability of over 75 per cent of Alberta's small communities is in question.
- "Towards a Comprehensive Rural Development Strategy for Alberta," Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 2002

The most rural parts of Alberta, where 19 per cent of our population lives and virtually all our natural resources are found, generates an estimated one-quarter of our provincial Gross Domestic Product. Ensuring the wealth-producing activities in rural Alberta can continue is critical to the overall economic health and future prosperity of Alberta.

Many rural Albertans feel the Alberta Advantage supports the development of urban centres, but does not support—and may even hurt—the development of rural areas. The drive toward efficiency brings centralization in both the public and private sectors. The economic shift from primary production to value-added and knowledge-based industries focuses attention on major industrial and academic centres. Little effort is being made, these Albertans feel, to include rural communities in development opportunities, recognize their role in our provincial economy and quality of life, or understand how their communities are affected by changes in the economy and service delivery.

There is also a sense that, for the Alberta Advantage to be maintained, rural Alberta must be strengthened. Economic growth and environmental sustainability rely on a network of rural communities. Ensuring those communities are healthy enough to be partners in growth and development is essential to the province's future as a good place to live, work and play. A strong rural Alberta is a vital component of a strong and prosperous Alberta.

Role of the Committee

In July 2002, Deputy Premier and Agriculture, Food and Rural Development Minister, the Honourable Shirley McClellan, established an MLA Steering Committee for Rural Development to examine the challenges and opportunities facing rural Alberta in a global economy.

The goal was to develop a framework for rural development that could be linked to Alberta's economic development strategy.

Doug Griffiths, MLA for Wainwright, and Luke Ouellette, MLA for Innisfail/Sylvan Lake, were asked to:

- Gather input from the public and MLAs on rural development issues and concerns and make recommendations to the Minister;
- Facilitate a dialogue with, and between, various government ministries whose activities affect rural development; and
- Review plans, frameworks and outlines developed by Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's Rural Development Initiative.

The agri-food industry, government and rural communities should jointly develop a comprehensive rural policy that recognizes that agricultural policy and rural policy are interdependent but with diverging outcomes.
- recommendation 7, "Agrivantage Report: Building Tomorrow Together", 2002

The MLA Steering Committee:

- Reviewed past rural summits and initiatives;
- Considered studies and rural development models in other provinces and countries;
- Interviewed stakeholders and attended conferences and meetings;
- Received submissions from interested groups and individuals; and
- Held focus groups in rural communities across Alberta, hearing from hundreds of people of all ages and in all walks of rural life.

These consultations gave rural Albertans the opportunity to express their concerns, ideas and visions. Their voices can be heard throughout this report — in its description of the challenges facing rural Alberta and the recommendations to address those challenges.

The work of the MLA Steering Committee builds on previous consultations undertaken by the Government of Alberta. The 2000 Ag Summit provided a snapshot of the agricultural industry and its potential, and the Summit's numerous action teams were a source of ideas on strengthening this economic pillar of rural Alberta. The Ag Summit and the subsequent Agrivantage report, *Building Tomorrow Together*, also called for the adoption of an interdepartmental rural development policy by the provincial government, and for commitment from all ministries and government agencies to that policy.

The 2002 Alberta Future Summit allowed Albertans to identify challenges and priorities for the future. The recommendations of this report bring the directions of the Future Summit into sharper focus for rural Alberta.

What is Rural Alberta?

Most of us carry a picture of "rural" in our minds: farms and small towns and villages. From a population perspective, this picture provides a good starting point—rural Alberta can be defined as the population living in rural municipalities and small towns and villages of fewer than 10,000 people, beyond the commuting zones of larger urban centres.

Ninety-five per cent of Alberta communities are rural, and they are highly diverse. Parts of rural Alberta are remote from any major population centre—others are a short drive away. Some communities remain dependent on agricultural production, others on oil and gas extraction or forestry, and others on a mix of industries. A few are enjoying rapid growth; many others are experiencing a steady population decline.

The perception is that the more rural an area, the less it is sharing in Alberta's success. The more an area depends on agriculture, the more likely it is to decline in population. And, the more remote an area the less likely it is to succeed.
- "Towards a Comprehensive Rural Development Strategy for Alberta," Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 2002

At one time, these communities were home to the majority of Albertans. In 1951, the urban and rural populations were equal. By 2001, urban dwellers outnumbered rural Albertans nearly three to one. In addition to a decline in its share of the provincial population, rural Alberta has experienced lower rates of population growth than urban Alberta. Between 1996 and 2002, thirty-six per cent of rural communities saw no growth or a decline in their populations. The population in the Edmonton-Calgary corridor grew by 12.3 per cent; the rest of the province grew by 5.3 per cent, largely due to growth around Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and the northern oil fields.

The rural population tends to be older and less educated than the urban population. Ten per cent of urban residents are aged 65 or older, while 11.4 per cent of rural Albertans are in that age group. In some rural areas the proportion is higher: in parts of eastern Alberta, for example, 15 per cent of the population is aged 65 and older. Over 15 per cent of urban dwellers hold a university degree, whereas in some rural areas only eight per cent do.

There are also income differences. Per capita income in 1998 was $21,700 for all Alberta, but ranged from $13,000 to $16,000 in some rural areas. Rural women, in particular, earn less than their urban counterparts. Rural Albertans are more likely to work in agriculture and primary industries, and less likely to be employed in service industries, especially producer services such as finance, insurance and real estate.

Challenges and Opportunities

Rural Alberta's diversity often makes it difficult to define the challenges and opportunities facing it. The committee's consultations revealed challenges and opportunities in eight interrelated areas.

Young people are leaving rural Alberta due to lack of opportunity. People who remain are challenged to maintain their livelihood. Time pressures, economic pressures and emotional pressures leave less time for community leadership.
- focus group participant, St. Paul

Human Resources

Many rural communities are losing a large portion of their population between the ages of 15 and 29 to urban areas. A national survey found that most Canadian rural youth think that rural communities are good places to raise a family, but less than a quarter view them as good places to make a living. In addition, of those who leave rural communities, only one in four returns (*Rural Youth Migration: Exploring the Reality Behind the Myths - A Rural Youth Discussion Paper*, R. A. Malatest and Associates, 2002).

Rural communities may also be losing vital services and businesses—such as schools, hospitals, government offices, and banks. This takes highly skilled professionals out of a rural community. Potential employment opportunities for youth are eliminated, and services that make communities attractive to new arrivals are lost.

Both trends decrease the leadership capacity of some rural communities. Existing community leaders—typically referred to as "the same ten people"—become exhausted, and community and economic renewal is more difficult.

Rural Albertans do not lack imagination, ambition or energy. What we lack is the funding necessary to pay someone to do the work. It is unfair to expect volunteers, who are challenged by rural economies and drought, to carry this load. We are beginning to suffer from volunteer burnout and I do not see that issue being resolved anytime soon.
- member, *Vermilion and Area Economic Development Board*

The population of Alberta in general is aging, but in some areas of rural Alberta, it is aging faster than for the province as a whole. This is particularly true for communities in Alberta's rural heartland—those where only five to 30 per cent of the population commute to a larger centre for employment. An aging population presents challenges in terms of setting priorities for services, renewal of the community and future leadership capacity.

Social Infrastructure

Rural Albertans are deeply concerned about access to essential services in their community. Those services are part of a broader social infrastructure that determines the quality of their lives and the vitality of their communities. Rural Albertans identified access to all levels of education, mental health services, health care and emergency medical services as important priorities.

Communities experiencing population decline have lost businesses, schools, health care and recreational and cultural programs. Those experiencing rapid growth struggle to meet demand.

Physical Infrastructure

For communities experiencing population or service loss, the existence or possibility of empty public buildings is a concern. This physical infrastructure is viewed as an asset, and rural Albertans want it used to enhance the quality of life and services in their communities. At the same time, other communities lack serviced lots, schools and health facilities to meet the needs of their residents.

The entire population needs to recognize the value of rural residents and areas, and turn their attention towards maintaining their viability and sustainability.
- focus group participant, Sedgewick

Rural municipalities face challenges in financing new infrastructure or upgrades to existing infrastructure. They do not have room to increase property taxes to levels that would generate needed capital—increased taxes would mean increased costs to local businesses and ratepayers, which many cannot bear. Communities with declining populations do not have the tax base for new, large expenditures.

Public highways provide critical access to services and markets for rural Albertans. Many rural Albertans feel the highway system needs improvement: their roads are of poor quality, or there simply are not enough to meet their needs. In addition, nearly all communities on secondary highways lack public transportation systems to serve the young, the elderly or those without private vehicles.

Many northern Albertans are concerned about the downgrading of services at Edmonton's Municipal Airport. Agricultural producers face higher transportation costs due to the abandonment of rural rail lines and closure of grain elevators.

The promise of the Supernet is widely recognized. However, the Supernet brings connectivity to a community—it does not provide individual access and the necessary technical support. Private companies provide those services, and in some rural areas, the costs are prohibitive.

When rural economies are affected (i.e. BSE) we definitely are impacted. When comparing August 2003 with August 2002, our sales have decreased by approximately 33 per cent.
- business interview participant, Red Deer

Business and Economy

The proportion of Alberta's rural population that lives on farms has declined from 50 per cent in 1971 to about 25 per cent now. Non-farm income has grown in importance as a part of total family income in rural Alberta. At the same time, service and business losses in some communities make off-farm employment harder to find or take it further from home.

Some of Alberta's major industries are struggling under current international market conditions. Commodity prices are low, and trade barriers have limited prices and production—agricultural subsidies and the softwood lumber dispute are long-standing trade concerns. Agricultural crises, such as the recent drought and the discovery of a BSE-infected cow in northern Alberta, have had a severe impact on many producers and the

rural communities and urban businesses they support. Tourism has suffered in the wake of international, national and local crises.

Technology also presents challenges. Resource extraction industries and agriculture are growing and consolidating, but increased use of technology means those industries use less labour. Other rural employers are not creating new jobs to replace those lost. That same technology demands new skills, but rural Albertans have less access to technology and training than urban Albertans. Yet, technology can be a key to rural revitalization. It can be used to overcome hurdles like distance and small populations in service delivery and can help create and support new businesses.

The agri-food industry, government and all Albertans should recognize the need for and commit to long-term investments that sustain a shared vision for the rural environment, economy, culture and quality of life.
- recommendation 8, "Agrivantage Report: Building Tomorrow Together", 2002

New business ventures, focused on new products, value-added production or the use of technology, could reduce reliance on commodity-based primary industry and non-renewable resource extraction. Changes in consumer preferences provide opportunities for niche industries, such as organic vegetable production. Demands for food security may lead to more opportunities for rural-urban partnerships. However, new businesses require financing, such as venture capital and loans, which is often difficult to obtain.

In some areas of the province, existing farms are surrounded by Crown land and are therefore unable to expand. Policies that prevent the opening of Crown land are seen as barriers to agricultural and economic growth.

Working Together

Shift from turf protection in small towns to cooperation—we can't all have everything.
- Rural Museum Board

There is a broad understanding that not every rural community can meet all the needs of its residents. Rural Albertans also know that regional cooperation is the only way they can afford the services and service standards expected in modern Alberta. They embrace the idea of regional collaboration, to obtain the economic, social and environmental supports required for development. Collaboration requires leadership, the skills to build successful, long-term partnerships and a new attitude that replaces municipal competition with teamwork.

Many rural communities have already built successful partnerships for shared recreational facilities, essential services and economic development. These have created a momentum that can be capitalized on.

Rural Albertans also identified the need for broader partnerships. Industry, various governments and ministries within government all play a role in rural development, and should all be partners in rural economic development initiatives.

Culture and Quality of Life

Rural Albertans view themselves as having a unique culture, and each community takes pride in its heritage. They also feel their heritage and lifestyle is an important part of the broader Alberta culture. Depopulation, the loss of young people and lack of promotion threaten this culture.

Farms are receiving less and less, being bought out, and losing the lifestyle which they want and live for.
- focus group participant, Olds 4-H Youth

Good schools, health care, emergency medical services and police services enhance the attractiveness of any community to youth, immigrants and city dwellers looking for a lifestyle change. Erosion of services undermines the quality of life in rural Alberta.

Rural Albertans see culture and quality of life as essential to rural development. Both can enhance rural communities as a choice of residence. Heritage and cultural activities are assets to tourism, and quality of life is a factor in business location decisions.

Environment

Growth in industry is putting pressure on the environment while the ability of many communities to provide good stewardship is reduced due to population and economic changes. Growth is also leading to new rules and regulations to protect the environment and health, which many rural communities struggle to meet. In addition, there are competitive demands for scarce resources like water and land—therefore, development in one sector may be pitted against development in another.

The number one concern expressed by rural Albertans is access to, and management of, water resources. They want access to water for irrigation, industrial development and municipal uses. They face difficulty funding required improvements to water quality and sewage treatment.

At the same time, they recognize the importance of sustainable use of water resources and preservation of the natural environment to agriculture and tourism. Many rural Albertans see environmentalism as an opportunity for economic growth, for example through eco-tourism and alternate energy production.

Rural Albertans also are concerned that they bear the costs of good environmental stewardship, while all Albertans enjoy the benefits.

Government

Under per capita funding formulas, rural communities can find it difficult to obtain sufficient funding to maintain a minimum level of services. Rural Albertans would like funding formulas, policies and regulations to consider the unique circumstances they face. They want the concept of equity to move from financial equity to service equity.

At the same time, regional restructuring and an interest in developing new delivery systems for essential services—such as health and education—may be opportunities for revitalization. Policies that promote regional cooperation and collaboration may provide for efficiency across a region and help preserve essential services and jobs in individual communities.

The shift in population from rural to urban areas also creates a shift in the political power base. Rural Albertans are concerned that it is more difficult to be heard on provincial matters and to get their concerns on the provincial agenda.

Our Approach to Rural Development

A Vision

One of the first tasks of this committee was to work with stakeholders on a vision for rural development. That vision is:

> **A rural Alberta that has vibrant and sustainable communities in which rural and urban families, individuals, organizations, businesses and governments are vital contributors to the growth, prosperity and quality of life of Albertans.**

The Government of Alberta accepted that vision in the spring of 2003.

Guiding Principles

Albertans are very clear about how rural development should be approached. Their views can be summarized in five core principles:

Government needs to listen to communities and facilitate people achieving vision and goals.
- focus group participant, Brooks

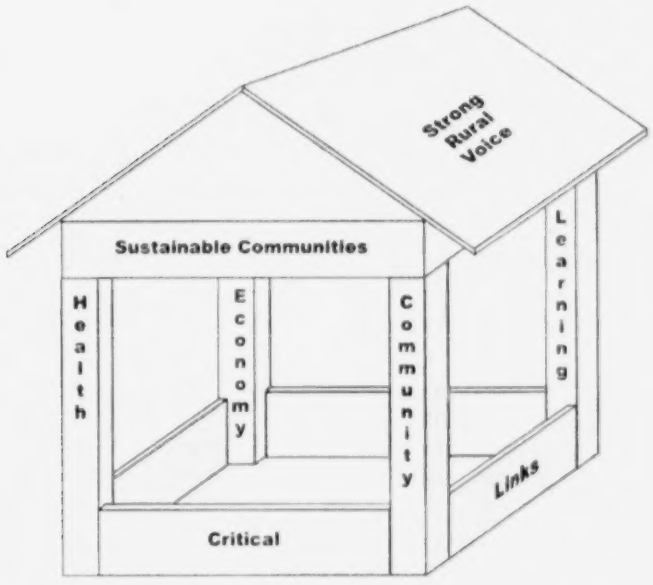
- Action must allow flexibility and innovation, recognizing the unique needs of different communities and regions.
- Action must be collaborative, not competitive, with cooperation among rural regions and communities, between urban and rural communities, and among levels of government.
- Action must be led at the local level, building on local resources and comparative advantages.
- Good stewardship of Alberta's land, air and water is critical, with a focus on sustainability, to preserve both the economic and quality of life advantages Alberta's environment provides.
- All Albertans should have access to a minimum level of essential services.

A Framework for Rural Development

The following recommendations and strategies capture the ideas of rural Albertans. They provide an integrated approach to rural development, which reflects the complexity of the issues and the need for coordination among government ministries, all levels of government, community groups and the private sector.

Create a range of strategies to obtain reasonable and sustainable rural initiatives to support rural Alberta.
- focus group participant, Edmonton

The goal is to create sustainable rural communities. The first step is to ensure that the foundation of those communities—the four pillars of health care, education, economic growth and community infrastructure—is strong. That foundation must then be linked to other elements of sustainability—quality of life, support for youth, opportunities for Aboriginal Albertans and preservation of the environment. Finally, they need to be protected, by ensuring a strong voice for rural Albertans and communities in government decision-making. The recommendations create a framework for rural development:



The recommendations build on the Government of Alberta's three core businesses of people, preservation and prosperity by:

- Investing in people through education and by building the capacity for leadership, decision-making, negotiation and partnership.
- Ensuring access to water, land and clean air, now and in the future, and preserving the culture, heritage and infrastructure that supports rural development.
- Increasing economic diversity and employment opportunities by adding value to commodities and creating communities that can attract new investments.

A. Strengthening the Four Pillars of Rural Communities

People need to see rural Alberta as a good place to live, work and play. We need to find ways to provide services locally, for example, health, professional, educational, financial.
- focus group participant, Westlock

Health care, educational and employment opportunities, sports, culture and recreation facilities, and basic services like water, roads and policing are the foundations of any community, rural or urban. The loss of any service decreases quality of life and economic viability – in a small rural town the loss can undermine the entire community. The addition of services can significantly aid revitalization.

Rural Health

Health care is a major concern for rural Albertans. The issue is not just access to care, although that is a priority. It is also ensuring rural Alberta benefits from health care as an economic driver. The Premier's Advisory Council on Health recommended that Alberta "recognize and promote Alberta's health sector as a dynamic, powerful asset to the provincial economy." This is especially true in rural areas, where local health care creates employment and draws skilled people. Loss of health services cuts off rural Alberta from this asset.

Health reform and new technology can support new ways of delivering health care. Primary health care and a team approach to the use of health professionals can enhance availability and quality of care. Telehealth and Health Link improve access to services and information. Visiting specialist services and the development of regional centres of specialization may provide opportunities for renewal of service in rural communities.

The health and economic needs of rural areas must be considered as Alberta works towards health care reform.

Recommendation:

- **Consider the recommendations of the Rural Health Strategy.**

Learning and Skill Development

Schools are the heart of many rural communities. Funding and policies that allow rural schools to continue to operate and provide quality programs can have a positive social and economic effect on an entire community.

Funding formulas need to be adjusted to recognize the financial challenges facing small rural schools. Strict per capita funding puts small rural schools that do not enjoy economies of scale at a disadvantage. Cost increases and purchases of new learning resources and technology are more difficult to absorb. Schools that struggle to provide the resources to support curriculum requirements are unlikely to attract new residents to a

community, and may motivate others to move away to ensure a quality education for their children.

There is a great threat posed to communities that undergo school closures.
- Minister's Council on Local Development, 1990

Similarly, policies regarding school closures must consider the size of the area that feeds a school. Students should have access to basic education within reasonable transportation times. Families faced with long bus rides for children to get to school are unlikely to locate in that community.

Greater collaboration between school jurisdictions, especially between separate and public systems that serve the same communities, can enhance the viability of rural schools. Many jurisdictions are moving in this direction, and have developed shared programs and resources while maintaining constitutional rights. Those ideas should be promoted and adapted across Alberta.

Rural school boards need additional support, beyond financial resources, to attract teachers. They need guidance in how to find and recruit educators, especially math and science instructors, to enhance the quality of education they provide. This could consist of best practice examples, workshops or cooperative efforts with other school jurisdictions.

Enriched opportunities for higher education and skilled employment can counter the out-migration of young people. These opportunities can also enhance rural residents' potential to undertake innovative economic activities. Rural Albertans need access to a wider range of learning opportunities locally—within an acceptable commute from their communities.

Efforts must be cooperative. Government, communities, school boards, post-secondary institutions and employers must work together to create opportunities for skill development within a region. Information technology and expanded evening and part-time learning can improve access to courses and programs. Cross-institutional collaboration can increase the number of programs available within a region. Empty classrooms or public buildings can provide physical facilities for adult learning. Partnerships between secondary and post-secondary institutions can expand learning opportunities for high school students and help rural youth with the transition to post-secondary education.

Rural employers should be partners in improving educational opportunities. Mentorship or internship programs, apprenticeship training, nursing and teaching practicums in rural areas should be encouraged. These programs can help rural employers attract and retain skilled people to maintain or expand their services or businesses.

All Alberta students, not just those from rural areas, need to be encouraged to consider rural communities as places to work once finished their studies. These students are a source of needed trades people and professionals, and future leaders.

Recommendations:

- **Recognize the unique situation of small rural and remote schools in providing quality education.**
  - Provide needs-based funding rather than per capita funding to ensure quality education within reason.
  - Create a "Small Schools Initiative" to support and enhance the excellent quality of education that is and should continue to be provided to rural students.
  - Ensure that changes to funding formulas to rural schools are accompanied by a "no loss" provision and have a growth index equal to real cost increases.
  - Enhance and support local capacity to attract and retain quality educators (particularly for math and science).
  - Enhance or encourage stronger links between rural high schools and post-secondary institutions and industry to smooth out transitions and facilitate greater education options for rural youth within their communities.
  - Encourage greater partnering between public and separate schools in providing educational programs and resources.

Use the school in the community to the maximum. Have other education and training out of these centres.
- Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties

- **Provide rural Alberta with reasonable local access to post secondary, technical and professional training and development.**
  - Improve access to trades training in rural Alberta (trades awareness and credits provided in junior and high schools – Registered Apprenticeship Program, Tech Prep, Green Certificate Program).
  - Explore and, where possible, implement alternate delivery of education, including use of information technology and flexible times and locations.
  - Promote rural Alberta as an opportunity and provide targeted support for rural "grow your own" retention of professionals.
  - Locate to rural Alberta apprenticeship programs that have a predominant presence in rural-based industries.

- **Build collaborative approaches with learning and skill development providers to better serve rural Alberta.**
  - Promote, recruit and design programs to address needs and opportunities in rural Alberta.

- Designate seats and provide incentives to students prepared to work in rural Alberta after completion of their education programs.
- Provide incentives and rewards to institutions that deliver post-secondary education in rural Alberta.

- **Implement the rural focused recommendations contained in the report of the MLA Committee on Lifelong Learning.**
  - Implement all 17 recommendations with specific emphasis on rural needs and opportunities.

Economic Growth

Rural Albertans must feel they have room to develop their ideas for economic development. Regional partnerships and alliances can lead to viable economic development plans and help municipalities provide services and infrastructure. They should be encouraged, between communities and between industries and communities. Municipalities and community organizations should be provided the tools and resources to form successful partnerships. Initiatives such as the Community Economic Development Accreditation Process, developed by the Economic Developers Association of Alberta, should be promoted and expanded.

Future Summit delegates emphasized that, in matters of economic strategy, the principle that "one size fits all" does not apply.
- *"Imagine Our Tomorrow…Report to the Government of Alberta", Alberta Future Summit, 2002*

Government programs, policies and regulations should be examined to determine whether they unnecessarily limit partnership approaches and growth and development in rural Alberta. New policies and regulations should be implemented with conscious consideration of the effect on rural Alberta. Alberta communities differ—a one-size-fits-all approach to regulations and policies does not work.

Government can play a more active role in stimulating economic growth. Decentralization of services and programs that can operate outside of a city should be considered, to bring skilled people to rural Alberta and build populations to support services and businesses. Information and communication technology can be used effectively to support decentralization.

Many rural Albertans have differing needs in terms of employment, due to other demands on their time. Employers and labour organizations need to recognize this in their employment policies and collective agreements. Flexible arrangements and part-time opportunities could help retain rural professionals.

New approaches to financing rural business ventures should be explored. Local communities and potential investors should be given guidance and further opportunities to create appropriate investment and financing

vehicles. Rural research and development expenditures and the expansion of existing enterprises should be encouraged, to create skilled employment opportunities and strengthen value-added and knowledge-based industry in rural communities.

We need to bring rural Alberta into the 21st century to be able to compete in the global market.
- focus group participant, Rocky Mountain House

Businesses that already exist are the cornerstone of rural economic development. In most communities, the primary employers are small businesses. The Government of Alberta needs to help these businesses with marketing to expand their customer base across Alberta and potentially beyond our borders. It also needs to recognize that policies that pursue the "big wins"—head offices or large plants—will have little benefit outside of the Edmonton-Calgary corridor. Attraction and construction of smaller ventures will have the most benefit for rural communities, and should receive equivalent government support.

Tourism is one industry that holds great potential for rural Alberta. However, current policies focus on promotion, and primarily on promotion of the large cities and the most recognizable attractions—such as the Rocky Mountains. A broader approach is needed, one that supports the development of rural attractions and facilities, packaging of attractions along themes that showcase rural areas, and promotion that gives more time and attention to rural Alberta. Growing interest in ag-tourism and eco-tourism internationally should be capitalized on to diversify the overall tourism industry.

Transportation and signage are hugely important to tourism in rural areas: without adequate access roads and clear signage, potential visitors miss tourism stops. Tourism promotion, along with access to national and international markets, should be actively considered in developing provincial policies for this infrastructure.

That more decision-making can be encouraged locally through local enlarged partnerships, with resources being made available to market and sell rural Alberta.
- focus group participant, Hanna

Recommendations:

- **Encourage rural partnerships and regional cooperation as a driving force for rural growth and sustainability.**
    - Create incentives to foster cooperation and coordination between rural organizations.
    - Provide tools and information, such as training models, labour mobility patterns, best practice information and inventories of successful ideas and models, to support successful collaboration and planning.
    - Support regional alliances and partnership initiatives, including rural-urban joint projects.
    - Support grassroots community development organizations.
    - Encourage regional cooperation on joint community facilities, and realign provincial partnership programs as required.

- Implement cross-ministry coordination of partnership/alliance processes and programs at all levels.
- Encourage and support the coordination and streamlining of grassroots community economic development planning.

- **Increase flexibility in policies and regulations to respond to rural needs and regional uniqueness.**
  - Provide assistance to small rural communities to meet the cost of increased government regulatory standards.
  - Implement an independent mechanism to review present government policies and regulations that affect rural Alberta (rural lens).
  - Enhance the roles of the Standing Committee on Law and Regulations and the Regulatory Review Secretariat, and coordinate with the rural lens.
  - Review policies and regulations to allow for alternative use of existing publicly funded infrastructure.
  - Use provincial Crown lands to strengthen rural economies.
  - Initiate a process of locating and, when appropriate, relocating to rural Alberta government functional work units that do not require specialized, large-city based infrastructure or support mechanisms.
  - Encourage other levels of government, school boards, regional health authorities, employers and labour organizations to increase flexibility in their policies to promote work arrangements that meet the needs of rural Albertans.

The provincial government must consider the accumulative impact on rural Alberta.
- focus group participant, Fahler

- **Increase access to venture capital and loans targeted at rural Alberta.**
  - Support the development of community bond programs for rural based communities and businesses, including project management.
  - Create an innovative funding mechanism to provide venture capital pools for rural businesses.
  - Encourage the creation of RRSP-eligible community funding vehicles.
  - Create a vendor financing mechanism for rural businesses, similar to that used by Agriculture Finances Services Corporation for farm land.
  - Establish tax incentive zones to encourage research and development or create new employment in rural areas.
  - Create a tax credit to encourage Albertans to invest in rural businesses and rural-located research and development.

- **Encourage and support value adding of rural resources to maximize rural growth and sustainability.**
  - Ensure that implementation of the value-added strategy (Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity) supports and enhances rural Alberta and rural-based commodity industries.
  - Explore ways to leverage the research and renewal elements of the federal/provincial/territorial Agricultural Policy Framework (Canada-Alberta Implementation Agreement).

- **Encourage and support small business projects in rural Alberta.**
  - Create a small communities division team within the ministry of Economic Development to look at small business projects.
  - Lend support to the development of a Rural Alberta Expo.
  - Promote small rural businesses to urban Alberta and the world.

Tourism is the development area where government needs to provide research and information as is provided in larger centers by tourism experts.
- Minister's Council on Local Development, 1990

- **Increase the recognition of tourism as a high-growth potential sector of the economy, particularly the rural economy.**
  - Build a plan for developing, packaging and marketing the fastest growing sectors of tourism, ag-tourism and eco-tourism.
  - Refocus the tourism budget to develop and package tourism attractions and facilities across all of rural Alberta to diversify and develop our tourism base.
  - Adjust policies and regulations to improve access and egress to tourist attractions and to allow for more frequent signage to better advertise existing and new rural tourist attractions.
  - Assist rural tourist places, associations and partnerships to market themselves internationally and across the province.
  - Establish a Rural Tourism Centre of Excellence for development and promotion of tourism in rural Alberta.
  - Encourage the revitalization of parks and campgrounds across Alberta.

Community Infrastructure

Rural communities do not enjoy the economies of scale found in urban areas. They have a smaller tax base to draw on to fund projects. Transportation costs for moving supplies, equipment and people are higher. Rural Albertans face higher costs for basic utilities such as electricity, telephone service and natural gas. Access to advanced technology can be priced out of the reach of many rural Albertans.

For communities to be sustainable, realistic funding programs need to be devised that will assist in provision of lifestyle needs...with a smaller population base rural communities need assistance.
- focus group participant, Viking

Recognition of the economic realities faced by rural communities in provincial funding formulas would help preserve and build essential services and infrastructure, like good roads, drinking water supplies and sewer systems. Much of this is owned and operated by rural municipalities, and their financial ability to maintain it is limited. Flexibility and elasticity needs to be incorporated into formulas for health, education and municipal funding, to allow rural Alberta to meet current and future needs and support rural development.

Policies regarding gas and electricity utilities need to respect the work of Rural Gas Co-ops and Rural Electrification Associations. These organizations built the infrastructure that allowed rural Alberta to grow and prosper in the past. They gave rural areas quality utilities at affordable prices. The Rural Gas Co-ops and the Rural Electrification Associations continue to be an asset to rural Alberta and can, and should, play an important role in the revitalization of rural Alberta. Government policies should consider and support these small utility providers, so that they can continue to serve rural Albertans.

The building of regional partnerships can also overcome the barriers created by small or sparse populations. Promoting the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes to support and maintain partnerships is critical. Giving them guidelines, models and best practice examples and building local leadership capacity will help.

The government, school boards and health regions should be open to the rural view that their facilities are community resources critical to rural development. Policies and regulations should be flexible and responsive to community proposals for alternative use of public buildings.

As information and communication technology grows in importance as a day-to-day tool, an economic driver and a support for service delivery, connectivity becomes more critical. The Government of Alberta has provided a strong foundation for connectivity through the Supernet. It must ensure that the final links are provided as a key part of the rural development infrastructure.

Rural development requires good transportation infrastructure. Roads, rails and airports must be recognized as essential elements for economic growth and development, be of acceptable quality and adequate capacity and provide good access to rural towns.

Recommendations:

- **Adjust funding formulas to reflect the additional costs and real benefits of providing services in rural and remote locations.**

- Revise formulas to address the unique needs and circumstances of providing services in rural areas (health, education and municipal funding).
- Review rural community safety and security agreements and protocols to ensure adequate staffing and support resources (ambulance and police).

- **Provide rural communities with the resources and support to build their local capacity for leadership, organizational development, asset assessment and empowerment.**

One of the key factors facing any rural development initiative involves capitalizing on the independent initiatives already demonstrated by rural Albertans.
- focus group participant, St. Paul

  - Provide additional funding to support and expand the role and use of libraries to deliver community and regional based information and unique services.
  - Expand existing or develop new databases to provide critical planning information and assessment tools for organizations and community-based private and public partnerships.
  - Increase support and recognition of volunteers as significant contributors to rural Alberta.
  - Provide leadership training for community leaders to build capacity in rural Alberta.
  - Encourage the coordination and sharing of community-based experience and expertise to build community and regional projects.
  - Provide community development tools to local and regional leaders.
  - Encourage new Albertans to live in rural Alberta by promoting the benefits and providing adequate support services.
  - Give Community Foundations more responsibilities in regional cooperation and partnership.
  - Provide a mechanism of conditional and unconditional funding to regional alliances using the established Agricultural Service Board program as a base model.

- **Maintain and utilize publicly funded infrastructure to maximize community and regional benefit.**
  - Review policies and regulations to allow for alternative use of existing publicly funded infrastructure.
  - Plan new publicly funded infrastructure to permit easy conversion to future alternative use.
  - Assess rural transportation infrastructures (highway, air and rail) for sustainability, with input from the public, and improve where necessary.
  - Ensure cost comparable service and technical support for high speed Internet to 95 per cent of Albertans.

- Establish a financial framework that allows rural municipalities to build and maintain adequate and sufficient infrastructure to capitalize on their unique competitive advantages.
- Reduce the barriers to living and doing business in rural Alberta by ensuring a reasonable price for, and timely access to, utilities.
- Continue support to Rural Gas Co-ops and Rural Electrification Associations as they provide rural Albertans with quality service delivery and affordable gas and electricity.

B. Critical Links for Sustainability

Quality of Life

Economic development is tied to quality of life. People want to live in communities that meet their physical, social and cultural needs. In today's labour market, competition to attract skilled employees is high. Businesses recognize this in choosing where to invest and locate their operations. In addition, community services and cultural activities can provide new business and employment opportunities and improve tourism potential.

The economic viability of communities is dependent on the quality of life.
- "Imagine Our Tomorrow…Report to the Government of Alberta", Alberta Future Summit, 2002

Rural development ultimately must enhance the ability of rural communities to attract young people, professionals, immigrants to Alberta and new businesses and investments. This requires attention to community development and key public services as well as economic opportunities.

Recommendations:

- **Recognize that economic and community development are interdependent activities and must be linked in both development and implementation.**
  - Integrate economic and community development functions provided by the government into a collaborative approach.

- **Promote and support the arts, culture, heritage, sports and recreation in rural Alberta and recognize their importance to community economic development**
  - Use existing government facilities to display art.
  - Hold rural arts and culture expositions in urban areas.
  - Encourage urban artists to locate in rural Alberta.

Youth

Future rural development depends on the ability of communities to retain their youth, particularly those with post-secondary education. This includes providing education, employment and recreational opportunities

for youth in rural communities. It also includes helping rural youth make the transition to urban educational institutions and incentives for youth to work in rural communities.

The government should adopt a policy of investing in developing youth, business, social and community building programs with the goal of mobilizing new generations to take leadership roles in community, business sector and municipal government.
- focus group participant, Westlock

Giving youth a voice in rural development will improve the quality of these efforts. Young people can clearly define the challenges they face. They are a source of innovative ideas for both business and service development. Many want to stay in rural areas and can identify what needs to be done to keep them there.

Recommendation:

- **Provide mechanisms to actively engage youth in rural development.**
    - Encourage the establishment of a rural youth council to act as a voice for rural youth issues and opportunities.
    - Develop a rural youth conference to start the process of increased youth involvement in rural Alberta.
    - Provide incentives such as scholarships, living subsidies or return-to-service bursaries to encourage youth to live and work in rural Alberta.
    - Encourage youth entrepreneurship through a mentorship and business development program.
    - Improve transition of rural students from high school to urban post-secondary institutions.

Aboriginal Albertans

Aboriginal Albertans share many of the same goals as other rural Albertans. They are interested in preservation of the natural environment and their cultural and community heritage. They are looking for economic development opportunities, especially for their young people. They are exploring alternative ways of providing essential services, like education and health, in their communities.

Aboriginal Albertans also are one of the fastest-growing and youngest population groups in rural Alberta. The importance of their role in rural development will only increase in the future.

Recommendation:

- **Ensure Aboriginal Albertans participate in rural development.**
    - Establish protocols to coordinate the efforts of the Government of Canada, the Government of Alberta, the Northern Alberta Development Council and other stakeholders on rural development projects involving Aboriginal communities, to promote efficiency and effectiveness.

The Environment

The natural environment is the backbone of many rural-based industries. It is also part of the appeal of rural areas as places to live and visit.

Strong rural communities are crucial to environmental sustainability. Rural Albertans have a vested interest in good management of water, land and other natural resources, as it can directly affect their livelihood. They are the source of day-to-day support and service. At the same time, broad societal expectations may impose costs to rural Alberta—taking farmland out of production or limiting economic activities. All Albertans benefit from supporting rural Albertans ability to meet environmental standards and provide stewardship.

Environmental sustainability also presents economic opportunities in the areas of eco-tourism, alternate energy production and conservation practices and technology. These businesses have the greatest potential for development in rural areas, as that is where the resources are located and most current energy production and resource extraction occurs.

Recommendation:

- **Support good stewardship of Alberta's natural resources.**
    - Adopt a comprehensive and collaborative approach to the provision of water and sewage services to meet rural community needs.
    - Develop strategies to help communities meet water quality standards to ensure a safe, high quality drinking water supply for rural Albertans.
    - Endorse the provincial water strategy, *Water for Life*.
    - Recognize that an adequate water supply is a prerequisite for rural development.
    - Promote water conservation strategies to provide for current and future water needs.
    - Promote research into improved carbon sequestration methods.
    - Increase the recognition of Alberta's natural resources as a major contributor to the overall wealth of Alberta.
    - Promote the amenities and landscapes of rural Alberta as a vital contributor to prosperity and quality of life in the province.
    - Recognize that good stewardship can imply economic losses and compensation may need to be considered.
    - Recognize that producers are good stewards of the land and an important part of environmental sustainability.

Water development for agriculture, industrial and household use is the single most important factor for rural development. Therefore consistent and secure water sources need to be developed to promote and sustain rural development.
- focus group participant, Hanna

C. A Stronger Rural Voice

Just as Alberta has become urbanized, so has the perspective in government decision-making. Most government employees live and work in Edmonton and Calgary. In addition, when the government shifted its focus from program delivery to policy direction, many rural offices and outlets closed. This removed a part of the feedback loop that gave central decision-makers a view of how government actions affected rural communities.

Alberta's two largest urban centres—which, with their satellite communities, each include populations near the 1 million mark—have the resources and people to ensure their concerns are expressed. The concentration of key institutions such as universities, financial centres and research organizations in Edmonton and Calgary draws in highly skilled professionals, giving these cities leadership depth.

In the Alberta of the future...the Alberta government represents the interests of both rural and urban Albertans and facilitates sustainable, diversified, environmentally responsible development.
- "Imagine Our Tomorrow...A Report to the Government of Alberta", Alberta Future Summit, 2002

Rural Albertans need a mechanism to ensure their concerns are heard and the impact of decisions on their communities clearly understood. A Rural Development Authority, led by elected officials, will allow better identification of rural development needs and appropriate responses. A "rural lens" will permit policies and programs to be viewed from their perspective. Together, these initiatives would balance the strength of the urban voice and allow better representation of rural Alberta's contribution to the province's economic development.

There are many opportunities for rural and urban collaboration, and for joint projects between communities. What is often lacking is knowledge about those opportunities, and a means of coordinating action. A rural-focused development organization would support collaboration and partnership.

Rural communities would also benefit from a single point of access to information and services that support economic and community development. This would reduce the need to contact numerous offices and agencies to obtain full information on available programs and services.

Greater understanding of the needs of rural Alberta among members of the Government is also important. Regular opportunities for dialogue need to be created, to allow rural Albertans to access not just their own MLAs, but also those from urban centres and other areas of the province. Dialogue would also support greater rural-urban cooperation in provincial economic development.

Set up a venue that would allow rural people from all parts of Alberta to voice their concerns and opinions, where they would be considered. *-focus group participant, Manning*

Recommendations:

- **Create mechanisms to maintain a rural focus and identify and champion rural issues.**
  - Establish a Rural Development Authority as a joint rural citizen/government body with a rural mandate and adequate staff complement.
  - Designate responsibility within each department to assess the impact of ministry policies on rural Alberta (rural filter).
  - Establish a cross-ministry committee (rural lens), consisting of representatives of each departmental rural filter, to assess the accumulative impact of government activity on rural Alberta.
  - Share the findings of the cross-ministry committee with the Rural Development Authority.
  - Create a one-window rural development information centre where Albertans can access programs and services from all three levels of government and not-for-profit organizations that support rural development.
  - Connect the Rural Development Authority with organizations involved in economic development, to support opportunities for partnership and joint projects.
  - Schedule a rural Alberta conference to bring all rural stakeholders together to share success stories and gain information on rural development tools.

- **Hold regularly scheduled dialogue meetings in rural Alberta involving rural Albertans and Government Caucus.**

Next Steps

The MLA Steering Committee was asked to develop recommendations to create a framework for a rural development strategy. That framework must be workable. Therefore, draft recommendations were shared with the Cross-Ministry Committee on Rural Development and a stakeholder group of rural Albertans. The feedback of these groups helped shape the final recommendations.

Provincial government ministries are currently taking inventory of existing programs and policies, analyzing gaps that may exist, and identifying opportunities for future action. The results will be combined with this report to form a new Alberta Strategy for Rural Development, led by the Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

This new strategy, which has been referenced in the priority Cross-Ministry Initiative on the Economic Development Strategy, will contain

actions that will be incorporated into ministry business plans beginning with the 2004-2007 business cycle. The Ministers of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and Economic Development will jointly lead the implementation of this cross-ministry initiative.

Conclusion

There is a need to generate new vitality in rural Alberta, to give rural Albertans the confidence to act. A strong rural Alberta is essential to the economy, culture and environment of this province. Ultimately, rural communities should be part of the Alberta Advantage—good places to live, work and play.

Rural development must be realistic. It is possible that not all small towns and villages will survive. Communities themselves will need to take the initiative, and the Government of Alberta must support their efforts.

It is important to act now. Alberta must be prepared for the demands of future growth. Access to the natural bounty that fuels growth depends on a network of rural communities and services. Our rural communities must be healthy enough to attract and retain the skilled people who build and maintain that network. Many small towns and communities in Alberta are on the verge of disappearing, and their loss would be a challenge to the province's continued economic development. This report outlines a framework for the next ten years, but action in the next two years is critical.

Rural development requires a long-term perspective. The goal is to preserve what rural communities have now, and build on that to prepare them to be partners in a promising future. The recommendations of this report look to, and beyond, 2015. Some of these recommendations and strategies will bring immediate changes and benefits. The entire strategy, however, will take years of commitment and work.

Appendix: Dates and Locations of Consultations

2002 – Focus Group Consultations

June 5	Brooks
June 6	Airdrie
June 7	Fort Macleod
June 10	Manning
June 11	Fahler
June 12	Edson
June 19	Rocky Mountain House
June 20	Sedgewick
June 21	Westlock
June 24	St. Paul
June 25	Hanna
June 28	Viking
July 9	Calgary
July 10	Innisfail
July 11	Edmonton
July 28	Olds 4-H Youth

2003 – Stakeholder Consultations

March 19	Community of Opportunities Committee, Oyen
April 1	Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, Edmonton
April 4	Association of Alberta Agriculture Societies Board, Edmonton
April 8	Rural Museums Board, Edmonton
April 11	Rural Physicians Action Plan Board, Edmonton
April 12	Agribusiness 2003, Barrhead
May 8	Board of Trade, Fort Vermillion
May 9	Economic Developers Association, Rocky Mountain House
May 14	Rural Library Board, Edmonton
May 30	Alberta Urban Municipalities Association Small Communities Committee, Edmonton
June 13	Killam Regional Stakeholder Meeting, Killam
June 17	Alberta Cattle Commission, Edmonton
June 18	Central Alberta Economic Partnership, Lacombe

Recommendations of the MLA Steering Committee on Lifelong Learning

1. **Enhance the Flexibility of Learning Opportunities:**
   - Government, learning providers and other stakeholders collaborate to better support and enhance learning opportunities to Albertans where and when they need them. This is of particular importance to rural Albertans.

2. **Promote a Coordinated Approach to Recognition of Prior Learning and Promote Course/Program Transferability:**
   - Alberta Learning work with post-secondary institutions and other learning providers to promote a coordinated approach to recognize prior learning, including the development of new and effective assessment tools.
   - Alberta Learning work with learning providers to promote greater course and program transferability, including programming available at the community level.

3. **Enhance Community-Based Learning:**
   - Alberta Learning encourage collaboration among providers of adult learning, libraries, businesses, and education consortia to ensure that learning opportunities are offered through community learning organizations with community-based instructors.
   - Alberta Learning encourage community based learning opportunities.

4. **Promote Trades as a Career Choice:**
   - Industry, learning providers, communities and government enhance their collaboration in promoting the trades as a career choice.

5. **Provide More Opportunities for Applied Learning:**
   - Learning providers be encouraged to provide more opportunities for applied (hands-on) learning for adults.

6. **Encourage Learning Providers to Collaborate for Adult Upgrading Opportunities in Adult Settings:**
   - Alberta Learning review the extent to which adults who return to complete high school have no alternative but to take courses in classrooms with high school-aged students and, if necessary, put measures in place to promote adult upgrading courses in adult settings.
   - Alberta Learning promote awareness of the need for different teaching strategies to meet adult learners' needs, especially those returning to learning.

7. **Improve Adult Literacy:**
   - Alberta Learning encourage support for community based adult literacy programming.
   - Alberta Learning increase the overall awareness of literacy as the foundational skill for all learning, including learning that improves employment potential.

8. **Enhance Provision of English as a Second Language Programming:**
   - Alberta Learning enhance the provision for English as a Second Language (ESL) programming.

9. **Build Confidence for Adults to Pursue Learning:**

- Alberta Learning and learning providers identify ways to assist learners who may lack confidence to return to learning.

10. Increase Awareness of Adult Counseling and Career Development Services:

- Guidance counseling and career development be available to adults on an ongoing basis to support informed decision-making. This includes better communication about current learning opportunities, standards and requirements, and student financial information.

11. Support Funding for Lifelong Learning:

- Alberta Learning regularly review its student loan eligibility and financial need requirements to reflect current costs of learning.
- Alberta Learning promote a discussion on how to respond to growing interest in part-time learning, including more funding for part-time learners.
- The Government of Alberta work with the federal government to assist learners who want to save money for learning later in life by establishing a RESP-like adult learning account.

12. Encourage Government and Employers to Support Lifelong Learning:

- The Government of Alberta consider providing employer tax credits.
- The Government encourage employers to support their employees in pursuing lifelong learning (e.g., time off, learning in the workplace, funding).

13. Achieve Effective Use of Technology, Including Learning Technologies:

- Alberta Learning encourage adult learning providers to adapt learning resources to a technological format that is attractive to learners.
- Alberta Learning work with stakeholders on strategies to support lifelong learning with technology, including infrastructure, training, technical support and public access points.

14. Encourage Seniors' Participation in Lifelong Learning:

- Opportunities for seniors to share their learning experiences with other learners be encouraged, including a registry of mentors to help encourage some Albertans to pursue lifelong learning.

15. Develop a Directory of Learning Opportunities and Supports:

- The Government of Alberta improve awareness of and access to a single source of information on learning opportunities and supports available to learners.

16. Develop a Policy Framework for Lifelong Learning:

- Alberta Learning use the results of these and other consultations to develop a Policy Framework for Lifelong Learning, including a vision, principles, goals, strategies, and outcomes to guide government and learning stakeholders in their support of lifelong learning.
- Performance measures be developed to measure progress toward increasing participation in lifelong learning in Alberta.

17. Communicate the Importance of Lifelong Learning:

- The Government of Alberta launch a marketing campaign promoting the importance of lifelong learning for economic prosperity, quality of life and citizenship.

Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity – Strategic Directions (Draft)

The following key strategies focus on initiatives that will be required to maximize value-added opportunities and drive balanced economic growth. These strategies recognize that:

- Alberta must create an economy where industry is driven by innovation and responds to market opportunities. This means building on Albertans' current competitive advantages and ensuring that we develop the people and skills essential for a knowledge-based economy and sustain the business climate and infrastructure required to be competitive.

- Alberta industries must focus on niche opportunities and use technology to their advantage. Alberta needs an innovation system with more applied research in learning institutions; stronger links between the private sector, institutions and all three levels of government; higher rates of technology commercialization, adoption and diffusion; and increased access to venture capital.

- Albertan's business landscape is dominated by small enterprises. Efforts to develop management skills and networks, alliances and supply chains, and to ensure access to equity capital will help more of these businesses grow to medium sized enterprises that are internationally competitive.

- Competitive opportunities exist in every sector, however, constraints on human and raw resources and public dollars underscore the need to focus on sectors with the highest potential for value-added growth and innovation.

- Priority sectors must recognize the vital importance of the platform technologies of ICT (particularly wireless and remote sensing) and health and bio industries. These platforms will provide potential breakthrough opportunities for Alberta's commodity and value-added sectors. In addition, value-added sectors such as energy services, construction and environmental services are becoming increasingly competitive on a global scale.

- An effective and efficient transportation system is key to competing in global markets. Alberta must have a well developed transportation and distribution system, integrating air, rail and road in support of the export of higher value goods and services.

Four Strategic Directions:

1. Enhance Alberta's Current Competitive Advantages

a. A Knowledge-Ready Workforce

- Improve ability to educate, develop, attract and retain knowledge workers.
- Focus education and labour training on value-added requirements.
- Continue to support recommendations in Prepared for Growth Strategy.

b. A Competitive Business Climate

- Align Alberta's tax strategies to support the value-added economy.

- Enhance Alberta's regulatory environment.
- Continue to attract global investment and projects to Alberta.
- Improve access to equity capital.
- Strengthen Alberta's financial services infrastructure.

c. Investment in Infrastructure

- Priorize investment in high priority institutional infrastructure.
- Develop an integrated transportation system.
- Improve connectivity by supporting Supernet initiatives.

2. Build Alberta's Innovation System

- Develop a province-wide culture of innovation that enhances cooperation, collaboration and convergence.
- Enhance capacity for technology commercialization.
- Increase rate of technology adoption and diffusion.
- Increase business investment in R & D.
- Focus and coordinate research investment.

3. Grow and Strengthen SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises)

- Increase management/ leadership capacity.
- Support mentoring for entrepreneurs.
- Facilitate development of networks, alliances, supply chains.
- Ensure access to market research/ intelligence/ export readiness and market development resources.

4. Focus on Priority Value-Added Sectors

a. Energy Technologies and Services
b. Value-added Energy Products
*c. Agri-Food**
*d. Building/Wood Products**
e. Tourism
f. Information, Communications Technologies (ICT)
*g. Health and Bio Industries**
h. Environmental Technologies and Services

* *Components of Alberta's Life Sciences Strategy*

Agriculture Policy Framework

Highlights of the Canada–Alberta Implementation Agreement

In June 2002, the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta signed a framework agreement on agriculture and agri-food in the 21st century. This agreement solidified the commitment of these governments to work together on developing and adjusting programs, services, and tools to help producers succeed today and tomorrow. It also identified the common goals they will pursue over the next five years.

The *Canada–Alberta Implementation Agreement* spells out many of the concrete measures that both governments will undertake to deliver on their common goals. The measures will help producers strengthen their businesses, increase prosperity, build on their diversification and value-added activities, and meet the demands of consumers at home and abroad, and will ensure that Canadian agriculture continues to be a valuable contributor to the quality of life of all Canadians.

Food safety and food quality:

- A **food safety and food quality program** will enhance food quality and safety systems across Canada. Initiatives under the program will support industry activities in the areas of on-farm food safety, off-farm food safety, traceability, and food quality. (Total investment: **$19.5 million**)

- A **fostering national approaches** initiative will further national food-safety program approaches by supporting a range of activities related to awareness, training, research, and surveillance. (Total investment: **$22.83 million**)

- **Food-safety process control systems for small and medium-sized food processing establishments, transportation, distribution, and storage industries** will be supported as these industries work to implement and audit HACCP-based food-safety systems. (Total investment: **$4 million**)

- **Food safety surveillance programs** will be designed to generate baseline data on food-safety hazards and to help develop mitigation strategies. (Total investment: **$7 million**)

- **HACCP implementation in provincially licensed meat and dairy facilities** will be supported to help these facilities move from current inspection-based programs to preventative food-safety process control programs. (Total investment: **$13.96 million**)

- A provincial **on-farm food safety program** will help various crop and livestock groups develop and implement national or provincial food-safety process control systems. (Total investment: **$3.25 million**)

The environment:

- Support will be provided to help producers with the **development and implementation of environmental farm plans**. These plans will help them increase their understanding of the environment, assess the potential environmental risks and benefits of their operations, and then identify measures to take action on their findings. An **incentive program** will also be established to help producers more quickly adopt the environmentally beneficial actions needed to reduce the risks and enhance the benefits identified in the plans. (Total investment: **$50.3 million**)

- **Soil, water, air and biodiversity beneficial management practices** will be developed to help support the adoption of environmentally sustainable farming practices. (Total investment: **$9.05 million**)

- Support will be provided for the **extension of soil, water, air and biodiversity beneficial management practices**. (Total investment: **$22 million**)

Renewal:

- **Business advisory services** programs will provide producers with access to a network of consultants that will offer business management counseling to help them make business decisions, develop business plans, access capital, expand and diversify their operations to create value-added enterprises, and develop and assess options for the future. (Total investment: **$20.73 million**)

- A **skills development and learning assistance program** will offer producers financial assistance to develop their skills and obtain on- or off-farm training, as well as career counseling, that could improve the profitability of the farm and increase family income by generating new business opportunities and employment. (Total investment: **$12.95 million**)

- A **skills development initiative**, in support of the skills development program, will identify appropriate skills, develop approaches to deliver agriculture-related skills and learning, and provide advice to governments and educational institutions on the availability of agriculture trainers and consultants. (Total investment: **$820,000**)

- A **business development initiative** will evaluate prospects for enhancing existing agriculture industries and to further develop other agriculture-related opportunities and business opportunities unique to rural areas. (Total investment: **$14.8 million**)

- An initiative to build **private-sector capacity** will support the development of professionals and agencies that offer information and services to primary producers. (Total investment: **$2.75 million**)

- **Feasibility assessment services** will help identify opportunities for new products and new types of agricultural businesses. (Total investment: **$2.5 million**)

- An initiative will help **develop strong leaders and managers** who will be able to run successful agricultural businesses and take advantage of the new opportunities offered to the industry. (Total investment: **$2 million**)

- An initiative will develop **business risk management information,** tools and other materials and opportunities for the beef, crops, pork and emerging industries. (Total investment: **$3.754 million**)

- Other provincial initiatives will also support the work of advisors under the business advisory services programs and support the development and delivery of tools, information and skills development initiatives to reach farmers and their families. (Total investment: **$4 million**)

Science and innovation:

- The overarching program for science and innovation will focus on **strategic development for science and innovation**. This program will include a benchmark study on current levels of investment in science and innovation, a realignment action plan to make adjustments that increase the effectiveness of those investments, and a strategy to increase investment and returns in Canada's bio-based economy. The program will also sponsor pilot projects with industry, the academic community, and research institutions to fill identified knowledge gaps. (Total investment: **$4.47 million**)

- **Innovations for new economic opportunities** will facilitate the transfer of research results and innovations into new economic opportunities for producers, processors, and the emerging bio-products sector. (Total investment: **$2.845 million**)

Business risk management:

The implementation agreement commits Canada and Alberta to delivering national programs on business risk management for producers. The funding provided to the industry through these programs will be driven by demand. Canada and Alberta will, however, commit **$69.667 million** over three years to support the transition from existing programs to the new business risk management programs.

The new programs include:

- A new **stabilization and disaster program** will be introduced to more effectively stabilize producers' incomes (including severe drops), while being affordable and flexible for producers.

- Crop insurance will be broadened to **production insurance** to better respond to the needs of today's producers. This may include providing coverage for more commodities, increasing options for diverse farming operations, and developing innovative insurance tools based on new technology, such as satellite imagery.

Key Directions and Strategies of *Water for Life: Alberta's Strategy for Sustainability* - Draft for Discussion – August 2003

1. **Adopt a watershed approach to management and decision-making.**
   - Develop and implement a watershed and source protection framework that addresses cumulative effects on a watershed scale.
   - Encourage new development where there is sufficient assurance of quality water supply.
   - Report on the condition of Alberta's watersheds.
   - Support improved water conservation and sound watershed management.
   - Implement the *Alberta Flood Risk Management Action Plan*.
   - Continue to meet interprovincial and international water management obligations.
   - Implement the *Agriculture Drought Risk Management Plan*.

2. **Involve all Albertans in managing provincial water supplies and resources.**
   - Establish a multi-stakeholder Provincial Water Advisory Council to advise government, guide the implementation of the Water Strategy and investigate and report on existing and emerging water issues (e.g. beneficial use, conservation opportunities, market and pricing mechanisms).
   - Encourage and support municipal governments to take a leadership role in protecting their watersheds.
   - Encourage and support the establishment of Watershed Advisory Councils to involve communities and stakeholders in watershed management.
   - Support community-based Watershed Protection Groups on the implementation of local water management solutions.

3. **Increase our knowledge and understanding about Alberta's water resources.**
   - Establish a research program to obtain the understanding required to address new and emerging water management issues.
   - Establish a public awareness and education program on water. Focus will be directed to all water users including individuals, municipalities, and industries to help improve understanding, conservation and wise use of water.
   - Increase and expand our knowledge of Alberta's water resource and ensure this information is made available to decision-makers and the public.

4. **Increase water conservation activities.**
   - Develop and implement a broad-based water conservation program in Alberta.
   - Set and report on the achievement of water conservation targets in partnership with Watershed Advisory Councils.
   - Improve monitoring activities on the use of water in Alberta.

5. **Allocate water resources more effectively.**
   - Implement, and monitor the application of, water allocation transfers within each river basin in Alberta thereby allowing transfers to facilitate beneficial use.
   - Manage groundwater using science-based methods to ensure aquifer sustainability.

- Ensure proper levels of funding to achieve long-term sustainability of Alberta's publicly funded water management infrastructure.
- Continue to manage Alberta's water resources based on the principle of "First in time, first in right", using all the tools within the *Water Act*.

6. Protect Alberta's aquatic ecosystems.

- Determine the current condition of wetlands in Alberta and establish regional wetland objectives.
- Determine the ecological requirements of the aquatic ecosystems of Alberta's rivers.
- Set objectives for aquatic protection in Alberta's rivers after full consideration of ecological requirements, economic values and social values in collaboration with Watershed Advisory Councils.
- Monitor and report on the health of Alberta's aquatic ecosystems.
- Determine the aquatic ecosystem requirements of lakes as needs emerge.

7. Protect Alberta's surface and ground water quality.

- Establish a Water Quality Assurance Initiative for Alberta's surface and groundwater.
- Undertake land-based activities in a manner to protect watersheds.
- Adopt a pollution prevention approach and strive for "zero discharge" of contaminants.
- Monitor and report on the quality of water in Alberta's watersheds.

8. Ensure all Albertans have safe and secure drinking water.

- For regulated systems: Determine the full cost of drinking water so that consumers and governments can make informed decisions.
- For non-regulated systems: Provide accurate, accessible and clear information to Albertans on private systems so that they can make informed decisions on how to assure the quality and safety of their drinking water.
- For regulated systems:
    i. Continue to adopt drinking water standards and monitoring processes that protect the health of Albertans.
    ii. Improve risk management of potential threats to drinking water safety.
    iii. Support and facilitate regional delivery of drinking water through partnerships with the private sector and large municipalities.